

Caregiver Stress or Domestic Violence?

*. . . You visit your neighbors, an elderly couple in their 70's. When you arrive, you're shocked to notice that the wife has bruises on her face and arms. When you inquire about the bruises, her husband says, "I love my wife dearly. But, you can't understand how difficult things are now. She can't take care of herself, keep the house clean, or cook meals. **I lost control for a few seconds and hit her just once.** It'll never happen again . . . I love her so much."*

What's the difference between caregiver stress and domestic violence?

Caregiver Stress

- The stress of providing long-term, unrelieved care may cause a caregiver to become abusive.
- Stressed caregivers know hurting another person is wrong. They feel remorse and shame.
- Stressed caregivers often want to help end the abuse.
- Stressed caregivers acknowledge the harmful effects of their actions.

Domestic Violence in Later Life

- Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviors, including physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. It is not caused by stress.
- Batterers may express remorse, but feel justified in using abusive tactics over another person to exert control.
- Batterers are not likely to feel responsible for ending the abuse. They will often blame the abuse on the victim.
- Batterers minimize, deny, and blame others for the abuse.

Why does it matter? Successful interventions in cases of stressed caregivers differ greatly from appropriate domestic violence interventions. If the interventions do not fit the problem, the results can be dangerous.

- **Appropriate interventions for caregiver stress:** Support and compassion for caregiver and victim. Counseling, respite care, and adult day care.
- **If domestic violence intervention is used in cases of caregiver stress:** Caregiver does not receive support necessary to reduce stress and improve capacity to provide care.
- **Appropriate intervention for domestic violence later in life:** Safety planning, legal advocacy, and support for the victim. Information on dynamics of domestic abuse for the victim and batterer. Holding the batterer accountable for abuse.
- **If caregiver stress intervention is used in cases of domestic violence:** Victim receives message that s/he is to blame for the abuse; perpetrator gets supported in minimizing the violence and blaming the victim; the victim is further isolated and placed in more danger; the abuse continues.